

Connection Groups Summer Elective – How to Study the Bible

SCRIPTURE REVEALS GOD THROUGH ITS DIVERSITY AND HIS DIVINE PLAN

IMAGINE the following scenario:

You walk into a room where your friend Bart is speaking on the telephone. He says, “But that would be foolish! You need to run.”

- **What does he mean?**
- **To whom is he speaking?** (his audience)
- **What happened that prompted him to say that?** (his reason)
- **What is his purpose for saying what he did?** (his purpose)

These aspects of Bart’s conversation are important! They all matter for understanding what he meant.

- **What would be foolish?**
- **Is this good advice?**
- **Should you help?**

IMAGINE different scenarios:

1 Bart is speaking to a friend who is in danger from a gang of angry teenagers. His friend wants to confront and fight them. Bart responds: “But that would be foolish! You need to run.”

2 Bart is speaking to his own son who wants to be lazy, lay around, and eat a lot of food in the week leading up to a race at school. Bart responds: “But that would be foolish! You need to run.”

3 Bart is speaking to his wife. She is eight months pregnant. She wants to walk to the market in town. Bart responds: “But that would be foolish! You need to run.”

His words mean very different things depending on the situation!

- In the first and second scenarios, Bart’s advice is good. But each has different implications, even for you. Do you help him? Do you stay out of it with his son?
- In the third scenario, Bart’s advice is dangerous. Do you help by disagreeing with him to protect the health of his wife and baby!

The meaning of words relates to their “**audience**,” “**occasion**” or “**reason**,” and the author’s “**purpose**.” The Bible is the same.

- God inspired Scripture by using human authors with diverse languages, personalities, gifts, education, and backgrounds.
- They wrote in different times and situations.
- They wrote for different reasons.
- They wrote in a variety of ways—narrative, poetry, letter, and other styles. Its diversity should affect how we study it, understand it, preach it, and teach it.

Last week – Seth introduced us to a very important ingredient to good Bible study, and that is **OPBSERVING THE TEXT**

To understand Scripture, we must ask the right questions—questions like these:

- **Why did the author write his book (poem, letter, etc.) as he did?**
- **Why did the author start it and end it the way he did?**
- **What did the author write first, then second, then third, etc.?**
- **Why did the author include this story, person, phrase, or word?**
- **Why did the author quote from Genesis? Psalms? the prophets?**
- **What was the author trying to do for his “audience” (readers or listeners)?**

The theme that runs through these questions is:

QUESTION 1: What is the author’s point? (That is: What did the author mean in this passage within this book?)

When you turn to a passage of Scripture to study, or to preach or to teach, if you do not start with this question, you are already headed in the wrong direction. Never start with the question: “What does this passage mean to me”? That comes later.

Another important reminder for us as we continue to Observe the Text is to remember that God has revealed himself and his wisdom in a unified way from Genesis to Revelation. These diverse writings hold together because in them the one God unfolds one unified plan.

GOD HAS ONE CHRIST-CENTERED PLAN

Listen to this theme among the early leaders of the church:

- Peter announced that Christ was delivered up to be crucified “by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge” (Acts 2:23).
- Peter, John, and the early Christians confessed in a prayer that those who crucified Jesus did “what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen” (Acts 4:28). When did God set his plan and will?
- Peter later wrote that Christ was foreknown as a lamb slain to ransom shameful sinners “before the foundation of the world” (1 Pet. 1:20).
- Paul wrote about how God predestined “wisdom”—which was Christ crucified— “before the ages” and “for our glory” (1 Cor. 2:7).

That God had a plan beforehand affects how we **INTERPRET** Scripture. Before God gave Israel the promised land ... before God promised the land to them ... before God even created Israel ... before God created anything, God had planned what he would accomplish. And his plan is full of Christ-centered grace and glory—Christ dying for people, rising for people, and giving his followers glory.

Let’s look at: Ephesians 1:3–10.

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. 4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—6 to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace 8 that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding 9 making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ 10 as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Eph. 1:3–10)

ANSWER QUESTION 1: **What is Paul’s point (in this passage, within this letter)?**

- In this letter, Paul wants to root, establish, and bind together the diverse Christians in Ephesus in the knowledge of the triune God (Eph. 1–3; see 3:13–19) and show how this should affect their lives (Eph. 4–6).
- Ephesians 1:3–10 is part of Paul’s opening that orients his readers around the glorious sovereignty, wisdom, and graciousness of the triune God.

ENGAGE: In this passage (Eph. 1:3–10), circle “in him” in verse 4. The “him” refers to someone. In verse 3, circle the one to whom “him” refers. Draw a line between your circles.

ENGAGE: Circle “through Jesus Christ” in verse 5.

ENGAGE: Underline when God made his plan.

- “Before the foundation of the world” means before the events described in Genesis 1.
- Even before the formless and empty watery earth existed, the one triune God chose us “in him”—in Christ (Eph. 1:4).
- God lovingly predestined us for adoption through Christ (Eph. 1:5).
- This topic can raise a lot of important questions, and here are a few:

- Since it was before creation that God planned to send Christ to save and adopt sinners through his blood, why did God not immediately send Christ in Genesis 3?
- Why would God take thousands of years and accomplish everything throughout the OT before finally revealing the mystery of his plan “in the fullness of time” by sending his Son?
- We do not know all of God’s reasons.
 - We do know that God is sovereign.
 - And we know that he is wise and good too!
 - He knows exactly what he is doing, and it is very good.
- But this is the point to focus on now: God clearly had a plan to do amazing things in and through Jesus Christ, and he established this plan before creation!

Remember, God’s revelation is like a richly furnished room. The OT shines a dim light on it. An onlooker sees vague forms of what God is moving toward. The NT turns on the bright light. All the rich furnishings are clear to see. They have always been there. Nothing about the room has changed. God’s plan was fixed before creation. But God, in his wisdom, waited for the fullness of time to shine the bright light.

When you open your Bible to Genesis 1, or Genesis 12, or Isaiah 9, or Isaiah 53, or anywhere in the OT, you know that God had already planned what he would do at the fullness of time: his Son appearing, dying for sinners, raising from the dead, unifying Jewish and Gentile believers, defeating spiritual forces, reconciling everything to himself under Christ! The OT and NT each reveal God gradually unveiling his plan—each in their own ways.

Jesus refers to how the OT speaks of His arrival in Luke 24:

25 He [Jesus] said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” 27 And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.... 44 He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” 45 Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. 46 He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things.” (Luke 24:25–27, 44–48)

What is Jesus saying here?

- In the OT, God progressively prepared the way for his Son and reconciliation under him to be accomplished and revealed clearly in the NT.
- **A warning** is needed before we proceed: Jesus does not say here that every passage and detail within the OT directly points to him. Do not try to “see Jesus” in the OT where God did not intend to show him.
- What Luke says is that Jesus “explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (24:27). This implies there are aspects in the Law and Prophets that do not concern him—at least not in the direct way he means in Luke 24.
- Knowing now that God did plan before creation to reconcile believers to himself under Christ in the fullness of time, have your eyes open for God’s character to be revealed in OT passages in such a way that they point to his character displayed even more clearly in Christ and his reconciliation in the NT.
- Remember this: God has wisely revealed himself and wisdom in Scripture through one plan to reconcile us to himself under Christ.

One Example of how the OT anticipates and prepares for Christ, but is often missed:
HOW DO WE SEE GOD’S PLAN IN 1 SAMUEL 17?

BRIEFLY SUMMARIZE 1 Samuel 17.

ANSWER QUESTION 1: **What is the author’s point?** (That is, What did the author mean in this passage within this book?) What Is the Author’s Point in 1 Samuel 17?

- God's people, including their king (Saul), were terrified of Goliath. It did not matter to them that Goliath was publicly shaming their God. He seemed too big and strong to confront.
- David, however, was deeply offended that anyone would shame God. He stood up for God's honor, even in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds.
- David had a bigger perspective: the Philistines seemed to be bigger and stronger and better equipped; but Israel's God was actually infinitely more so.
- David's courageous faith is featured prominently. It is surely an important aspect of 1 Samuel 17.

What Is the Author's Point in the Whole Book?

- But more is going on than a moral lesson about faith.
- In 1–2 Samuel, God is establishing his visible reign in the way he wants— through the Davidic dynasty— in contrast to the way Israel wants a kingdom—through a leader like Saul.
- Throughout the whole Samuel narrative, God teaches the leaderless Israelites what it means to be his people in his kingdom (1 Sam. 1–7).
 - o He does this first by granting their request of the certain type of king they want: Saul. This is an abysmal failure, for Saul does not care to honor God (1 Sam. 8–15).
 - o Then God anoints his own king for them: David (1 Sam. 16).
 - o David and Goliath fight in 1 Sam. 17 (we will return to this).
 - o In 1 Samuel 18–2 Samuel, the author charts how God dramatically and faithfully establishes David's reign and his promised Davidic dynasty. God establishes his visible reign on earth in the way he wants.

How Does 1 Samuel 17 Fit within 1–2 Samuel?

- Within this whole narrative, 1 Samuel 17 plays an important role: in the face of a seemingly unbeatable foe who dishonors God, God grants his weak people victory through his anointed ("messianic") king (David), who desperately wants God to be honored.
- Within the whole storyline, it is in 1 Samuel 17 that God is beginning to situate the anointed David in the public eye as the king of his choosing for his people. There is a lot more going on in 1 Samuel 17 than a moral lesson about faith (as important as that is)!

Many preachers see "David and Goliath" as a moral lesson about how we can defeat our own giants with God's help. "Be like David." That moral message is fine and true, but it stops short of the author's point in this passage and book (QUESTION 1). And it certainly stops short of the glory of how this passage contributes to God's plan (QUESTION 2).

- 1 Samuel 17 is a story of God granting victory to his weak people, not through their own bravery or goodness or even faith, but rather through the faith and actions of his anointed ("messianic") king on their behalf.
- God's people enjoy the victory because God's anointed king wanted to honor God, he fought for them won! They joined in his victory.
- This pattern within 1 Samuel 17 is precisely the pattern God is driving toward.
- Remember, before creation God planned to defeat Satan, sin, and death through his Son, the anointed (Messianic) king Jesus. God's goal has always been to graciously cause his weak people to share victory and its benefits, not because of who we are or what we might do, but because of his chosen and anointed king Jesus, fighting and winning the war on our behalf.

Regardless of which book or passage we turn to, there are now two interpretive questions that we must ask (and in this order):

QUESTION 1: ***What is the author's point?*** (That is, What did the author mean in this passage within this book?)

QUESTION 2: ***How does it fit in the Bible?*** (That is, How does this passage [within this book] illuminate God's plan to reconcile us to himself under Christ?)

Both questions are very important. God inspired Scripture through diverse authors. Thus, we must ask what each author meant (QUESTION 1). God has masterfully revealed his one plan in Christ through the authors' writings. Thus, we must ask how each uniquely testifies to God's one unified plan in Christ (QUESTION 2)?